

Existential Shame: A Liturgical Approach to Soul Care of the Victims of Child abuse

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Abstract

This article offers suggested ways to help create safer worship environments for those who have been wounded in mind, body and spirit from child abuse. Most often Existential Shame distorts his/her faith; and his/her basic trust has been distorted or even aborted through child abuse. Pastors may offer safer worship opportunities through safer liturgies and rituals. Sensory liturgies may contribute to the healing process of the Limbic System/the emotional brain through the process of neuroplasticity because positive worship experiences help to create new neural pathways and connections in the Limbic System.

Introducing Shame

Can you imagine attending church yet feeling disconnected? Can you imagine how it might feel to sit in church, year after year, in quiet desperation? Can you imagine how it might feel to endure a sense of distance from God and other worshippers? Interim ministers can be the first responders. One of our callings is to help create a new vision for our churches.

Psychiatrist Carl Jung is attributed with the quote: "Shame is an emotion that eats the soul" (Jung, 2019). We are in a cultural crisis of substance abuse often due to child abuse. The impact of substance abuse and child abuse affects the church, and, in particular, our worship. As an experienced Interim Minister Specialist, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of substance abuse on the church and in some wounded congregants (Welch 2019, 26-32, 40).

About six months ago, I was asked to serve a local church for several months as they continued the process of interviewing for a settled pastor. Due to my burden for safer worship environments, I felt that I needed to speak from the pulpit what I name as the 'difficult words' such as drug abuse, child abuse, incest, spousal abuse, rape and the like. Also, I offered a liturgy of guided prayer of release for anyone dealing with the social sins that I mentioned in my sermon. I said, ...

There may be someone here, or many here today who have been impacted by, (I named the 'difficult words') or, who knows of anyone who has been impacted by these concerns." Safe invitations create safer worship environments

The Follow Up Narrative

This is how events unfolded.

The following week I received a call asking if I would be willing to meet with a congregant before the service and that is was very important. The following Sunday, a woman, a church leader showed up at my office before the service. This is what she said, "Pastor, when you mentioned substance abuse last week, I felt such a deep relief. I was so ashamed to tell anyone, but because you mentioned it in your sermon, I knew that it was safe for me to share. It was twelve years ago when my twenty-three-year old granddaughter called and asked if she could live in my basement apartment. She was homeless and using substances. Of course, I welcomed her. One day I called down to her but there was no answer. She had overdosed and was dead in my basement apartment. I was terrified and afraid to tell anyone because of the shame that I felt; that my granddaughter was a drug addict. I did not think anyone would understand because of the shame of substance abuse. I was too ashamed to ask for help from my pastor and church family. I told them that she had a heart condition that caused her death. I felt guilty for lying, but I could not endure the shame of it all. For the first time, since your sermon, I have found the courage to talk about it; and when you offered a prayer of release for burdens, I gave it to the Lord, and for the first time in all of these years, the burden and shame has lifted and I feel free.

The Healing Power of Naming

This story begs the question: "How many people in our congregations from children to senior citizens sit in church, week after week, year after year, in quiet desperation; isolated in shame and in fear of being exposed for something he/she never did but was a victim of another person's sin?" Unfortunately, I myself, as a survivor of child abuse, know firsthand the limits of my comfort in church prior to healing, how the liturgy, sermons and even biblical readings did not 'feel safe'. When ministers speak the difficult words from the pulpit, they may be the first to unlock that impenetrable barrier that keeps the wounded isolated and in a prison of pain¹

Shame is a significant deterrent to faith in God and hope and healing. We are familiar with the biblical passage found in the New Testament,

...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Heb 12:2,(NIV)

As Jung said, "Shame eats at our soul." Robert H. Albers offers two insightful definitions for the word shame (Albers 1995, 8-15). The first is what he names as *discretionary shame*. This type of shame functions as modesty, protecting ourselves and giving us a sense of privacy. "*Discretionary shame* is an integral and necessary part of a healthy person's existence." The second type of shame is *disgrace*

¹ For safe pastorally sensitive liturgies and invitations please refer to the resource at the end of this article in (Welch 2019, 133-154).

shame which is self-evident. Albers suggests that “*disgrace shame* breaks the relationship one has with self and others.”

I would propose another type of shame: *existential shame*. There is a lethality in *existential shame* because it may lead a wounded person to suicide. This type of shame is nearly intolerable. *Existential shame* is experienced in this way. A wounded person who has been violated in physical, emotional or sexual abuse is mired in the emotion of shame. *Existential shame* is sheer humiliation and affects the mind, body and spirit as well as relationships, particularly one’s relationship to God, others and the church. The wounded person experiences mental visual images and feelings associated with sexual abuse. In interpersonal relationships, the wounded person tells himself/herself that the other person can see the violent sexual scene, therefore, making the wounded one feel nearly panicky to get out of the relationship with that other person and/or church (Welch 2019, 74-81).

In a recent conversation with a colleague, I mentioned that the shame of the Cross may not go far enough for the abused. Her response was one of adamant disagreement until I explained it further. Those who have been sexually abused or touched in his/her private parts may not be able to relate to Jesus’ shame for his nakedness on the Cross. The wounded one may feel that sexual abuse *feels* far worse. My colleague quickly agreed that this may be a real possibility when we recall that *existential shame* is sheer humiliation, a soul devouring feeling, shame.

Some elementary understanding of the neurological aspects of such trauma is necessary prior to pastoral interventions. It is vitally important that clergy understand that the emotional brain, the Limbic System, has been ‘encoded’ with trauma. Traumatic events such as abuse, and substance abuse injure the neural connections and create biological-chemical changes in the Limbic System. But this is not the whole story. There is also hope for healing, the Limbic System is able to restore itself, in time, through the process of ‘neuroplasticity’. The Limbic System can create new neural connections where damage has occurred (Welch 2019, 9-21).

Practical Responses

How may we, the interim minister be responders to these crises and targeted soul care? The following is not an exhaustive list.

1. We should purposefully and prayerfully speak ‘difficult words’ from the pulpit. The notion of ‘difficult words’ refer to issues such as substance abuse, sexual abuse, spousal abuse and so forth. When a wounded person hears a pastor speak these words it may help the wounded to feel that his/her traumatic wounds are understood by the pastor. There is power in naming, so offering these ‘difficult words’ may help the wounded not to feel so isolated and alone. Interim ministers need to feel comfortable when talking about the emotions of shame. If he/she is not comfortable speaking them, then he/she should process why with a qualified therapist. Otherwise, to not address the ‘difficult words’ may, by default, further silence those who need to hear the

words from his/her trusted minister. When ministers are faithful in speaking aloud the 'difficult words', it shows the congregants that this church both understands and cares about them (Welch 2019, 2-6).²

2. We can take opportunities to create options in liturgy for congregational involvement. For example, when a minister officiates at the Word and Table, especially the Holy Eucharist, it is important to offer the option of private communion for those who do not feel comfortable in coming up to the Table. Due to the physicality of the Holy Eucharist and the very words of body and blood, these words may serve as severe emotional triggers for those who were abused. Because the wounded were often silenced in traumatic ways, it is vital to make certain that the liturgy *feels safe*; and that it also provides *options* for participation due to the underlying existential shame that the wounded may feel.
3. It is critically important to *rightly divide the Word* at two levels. What the wounded hear may not be what the minister reads. For example, when we read that "*Jesus took upon himself our sins and sorrows,*" this text may be heard differently by the wounded. The word, *and*, in this text functions as a conjunction, but the wounded one may hear it as a list of words. The wounded may hear it as "*I sinned so that is why I am suffering.*" 'Care-full' exegesis not just careful exegesis of the text is essential (Welch 2019, 106).
4. Using creative liturgy involving sensory worship modes may engage more congregants in a transformative worship experience. The wounded have, by default, pretty much shut down some emotions, so offering more sensory worship rituals may aid him/her to more fully engage in the service. For example, the *Liturgy of a Guided Prayer of Lament* invites the entire congregation to participate. In doing so, there is an unspoken sense of safety for the wounded because no one person, group and lament is singled out (Welch 2019, 150). Framing the invitation is critical for creating a safer worship environment. For example,

There may be those here today who are suffering from, (name the Difficult Words) or maybe someone carries a concern for another who is suffering. Regardless, all are invited to participate.

Also, the service offers several sensory expressions such as writing, time for personal and private prayer, and then at the end, a ritual for leaving all laments at the Cross through a ritual of casting each personal and private lament into a pre-prepared fire outside in the church yard. This ending allows for all to toss his/her private lament into a fire as a sweet incense of prayer to God. It is critical to create a safety in all worship services. Also, offering options for participation in liturgical practices may help the wounded to feel a level of control because abuse removed options and safety.

² Pastors who do not feel comfortable with the 'difficult words' themselves should formally process his/her family-of-origin feelings with a certified pastoral counselor. Otherwise, he/she may, by default, use his/her congregation as a way to cope with his/her unresolved issues. The wounded need to hear that his/her pastor understands her/his woundedness and feel safe to speak with his/her pastor. To not speak the Difficult Words may remove a vital opportunity for the wounded to hear that his/her pastor both understands and cares.

5. Finally, interim ministers, for self-care and care of others, should always have well qualified therapist as referrals. It is critical for ministers to remember that the wounded often have suicide as a “backdoor” for potential release from the pain and suffering from child abuse. The wounded person may be very fragile. So thoughtful soul care through safer worship environments may help lessen or even remove this potential danger.

Ministers may be the first to address these critical concerns. As our homiletic Professor once told us, “*When you preach a sermon, you must remember that you are addressing spiritual life and death.*” The specialized call to interim ministry, is particularly filled with wonderfully creative options for service to our churches. Ministers may be the first to take hold of this process, of naming the interpersonal sins of our culture, and then offering creative healing modalities and options, thereby, creating safer worship environments.

References

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About the Author

Rev Dr Barbara Welch Dr. Welch has served for over twenty-five years in crisis care ministries. Dr. Welch earned her Master of Divinity/Theology & Arts degree and Doctor of Ministry degree from Andover Newton Theological School. She is certified in Child Theology through *Godly Play*. She has founded a church and community outreach program for substance abuse called: *Horizons of Hope a Substance Abuse Church and Community Outreach Program*. Her ministry specialty is for those who have been wounded and who have turned to substances as coping mechanism for which she has received a World Changer Award by a major denomination and has gained significant ongoing grants from the federal government USA. Barbara resides in South Boston.